

## **Spirituality in Aurelia Baumgartner's Tanzphilosophie**

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### **Abstract**

Against the background of a non-religious understanding of spirituality in the context of consciousness studies, the article analyses the dance practice, understood as embodied philosophy, of Aurelia Baumgartner. The article considers her inspiration, intuitive collaboration with other artists, the concepts of femininity, beauty, and non-linearity central to her practice and thinking, her biography (in terms of training, a pivotal, life-changing, crossroads she encountered at the age of 14 and her heritage), and cultural and philosophical contextualizations.

### **Keywords**

spirituality

consciousness studies

dance

intuition

crossroads

beauty

### **Spirituality**

From the earliest history, the arts have been associated with a beneficial impact on those exposed to it as makers or receivers. In the West, Aristotle in his *Poetics* wrote about the

cathartic impact of theatre, while in the East, the *Natyashastra*, the ancient Indian text about drama and theatre, which also includes music and dance, relates how dance/drama were created by Brahma, the creator, in response to the request of the Gods for him to create an art form accessible to all human beings and with the explicit purpose of restoring the golden age to humankind. The use of the arts in therapy (dramatherapy, dance therapy and so on) confirms the validity of such early claims of the beneficial impact of the arts on humans in terms of increased well-being, as does research into that impact.

This role of the arts in improving our lives has been contextualized further in the fields of religion, philosophy and consciousness studies. The high currency of contextualizing the arts in these fields is reflected in academia in the emergence and continuing success of the ‘Theatre, Performance and Philosophy’ working group within the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA), the working groups ‘Performance and Consciousness’ and ‘Religion and Performance’ within the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the ‘Performance Philosophy’ working group within Performance Studies International (PSI), the network ‘Performance Philosophy’, the Institute of Performance and Spirituality with its associated journal, and the recently founded journal *Dance, Movement and Spiritualities*, as well as, in the context of consciousness studies, *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* (refereed online journal, book series with Intellect and Rodopi, and biannual conferences since 2005).

For most of these contexts, spirituality, explicitly or implicitly, is central, and in many, the term and concept of *spirituality* has been understood in a non-religious way. It is this understanding that forms the basis of my article, with the implication that ‘spirituality culminates in the full development of mind’, and ‘any move in the direction of this fullness can be called spirituality’ (Malekin and Yarrow 1997: 90).

## Aurelia Baumgartner

It is against this understanding of spirituality that I discuss the performative practice of German Aurelia Baumgartner ([www.tanzphilosophie.de](http://www.tanzphilosophie.de)). The discussion is drawn from a personal, three-hour conversation I held with Baumgartner in one of the studios of her dance school, within a few feet of Lake Starnberg near Munich, in December 2013. The tranquillity of the studio and its surroundings provided an ideal environment to allow the physical and emotional memories of Baumgartner's performance of *Nomad's Rhythm* on the evening before that interview to inform the conversation.

Insert Image 1 here

**Figure 1:** Aurelia Baumgartner in *Human without Cerebrum: Attempts* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

Following many years of training in a wide range of classical and contemporary approaches to dance, she founded the School for Contemporary Dance, housed in a pavilion within a few feet of the shore of Lake Starnberg in Berg, near Munich in Germany, where she has developed a student base of around 120. Her studio also serves as the basis for her own dance projects, which she launched in 2004 under the umbrella of 'Aureliana Contemporary Dance Project'. Her website provides documentation of her projects, including video clips of some, and complete video recordings of others of her productions. Most of the video material has been edited from recordings of live performances, only some is artwork created specifically for the video medium.

I would like to present my discussion of Baumgartner's work in terms of concentric circles around a core. The circles are:

1. *Inspiration* (how she gets ideas and how she develops them into the performances open to the public);
2. *Intuitive collaboration* (details of the way she works with the dancers, musicians and other artists she involves in her productions);
3. *Femininity, beauty and non-linearity* (overarching characteristics of her approach and performances);
4. *Biography* (her training, a pivotal, life-changing, crossroads she encountered at the age of 14 and her heritage);
5. *Cultural and philosophical contextualization* (training in a wide range of approaches with related dance vocabularies that she now has at her disposal in creating her choreographies, and studies to M.A. level in western philosophy, in addition to further reading and practice of eastern philosophies).

It is possible to describe and analyse Baumgartner's work in terms of these circles. They constitute an approximation of the core, which can be understood as the communal experience of Baumgartner's performances, arising in the spaces she shares with her spectators: the physical spaces of the venues she performs in, and, much more intangibly, the spaces of consciousness, where the contents and characteristics of those concentric circles merge with the sensitivities and existential orientations of Baumgartner and each spectator at any moment of any performance. This approach must thus be understood as a heuristic tool to capture a holistic practice leading to a holistic experience.

Insert Image 2 here.

**Figure 2:** Aurelia Baumgartner in *Asturias* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

## Inspiration

The question of artistic inspiration has been fascinating across centuries – each era develops its own ideas (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005: 15–19). Baumgartner realizes that ‘altogether I can say I go through life with an artist’s eye at all times. Whatever I feel might be an inspiration. I might be inspired by anything I see, which I then try to capture with my camera’ (2013). If she is interested in a theme or subject, she will first of all try to digest this within herself to allow it to grow and develop in a tacit way.

Once Baumgartner has settled on a theme or subject, she tries to find material from her rich reservoir of impressions that fits and matches with that theme or subject. Thus her work emerges tacitly, from within. An example is the production of *Mensch ohne Großhirn/Human without Cerebrum*, which she eventually presented first at the conference Soundcheck Philosophie in May 2013 in Naumburg, Germany, and which she revived as part of *Nomad Rhythms* in late 2013. The performance of this revival in Starnberg on 13 December 2013 is at the centre of the argument in this article. Baumgartner had an overall idea for this performance piece first and then she got in touch with the musicians, Markus Wagner (bass, composition, arrangement), Ken Weinzierl (guitar) and Franz Schledorn (trombone) and asked them whether they might be interested in working on this project with her to take it further. At that stage she found dialogue very important also because within herself she works with relations and relationships in the triad of impulse, resistance and structure. In that process the poem by Durs Grünbein, which she had read sometime ago, came back to memory. She allowed all these associations to come freely from her subconscious. Then she

thought that the production might be an interesting project for a specific event, the Soundcheck Philosophie event in Naumburg, which had *alienation* as its main subject.

With the poem I had text, then I thought I would like to have a dialogic structure for the whole piece, allowing myself to enter a dialogue with the poem, and in the end at the beginning the first and the second part enter a dialogue with each other in so far as one element of the first part appears on the screen while I mention and recite the second part and *vice versa*. I might pick up something here, discard there and build the discarded material into the process somewhere else, or not, as the case maybe. (2013)

Baumgartner has thus developed, and implicitly trusts, an intuitive way of responding to intuitions and working with them. This applies not only to her creative work on productions, but also to her writing as a philosopher:

I wrote my MA thesis about philosopher Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. The basic idea for this subject and the argument came in a dream to me. Immediately after I finished dreaming, I got up, sat down at my desk and wrote down the ideas because otherwise I might have forgotten them again. In this way I had the whole structure and the argument in front of me. (2013)

Realizing this is the way she works means, practically speaking, that she keeps a pen and paper next to her bed so that if necessary she can write something down very quickly also in the middle of the night.

When I have got ideas for choreography in the middle of the night I might be found to go down into the basement where I have a very small studio space and then do some dance movements in my night gown which I capture with a camera so that I can be assured that it will be there the next day. (2013)

Baumgartner thus acknowledges the tacit functioning of her consciousness; she makes full use of it in her creative and philosophical thinking, and she contextualizes it as well, arguing that many ego- and self-boundaries are lifted in the state of sleep, which makes it possible for people to perceive, on that level, basic structures of life which our soul is aware of but which are overshadowed by the intellect during the waking state. These are overshadowed by schemata that we have developed in order to allow us to orientate ourselves in life. All those schemata exist in order to help us overcome a fear of the unknown: ‘the artistic process, as well as deep sleep, allow us to let go to some extent at least of those schemata and safety mechanisms’ (Baumgartner 2013).

To summarize: Baumgartner’s inspiration and her resulting way of working are predominantly intuitive and thus spiritual. She has realized this and the implications for her life and her work, and trusts it.

Insert Image 3 here.

**Figure 3:** Aurelia Baumgartner in *Wicked (Siguriija)* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

### **Intuitive collaboration**

Baumgartner’s contextualization of the production of *Nomad Rhythms* in Starnberg on 13 December 2013 for the programme notes indicates the ways in which Baumgartner works

with her fellow-artists on her productions. This section takes up the discussion of Baumgartner's intuitive approach to her work, extending it from her inspiration to the way she works with other artists she involves in her productions. A good example is the element of contact improvisation that was part of one of the dialogues or duos with the Spanish *flamenco puro*/pure flamenco dancer, Jairos Amaya, in the *Nomad Rhythms* production. It must be noted that the level of physical contact characteristic of contact improvisation was not easy for Amaya, because *flamenco puro*, the dance form that he is used to and has been trained in, is predominately a solo form and any contact is symbolized rather than expressed directly. For example, to infold the other dancer and to move in such a way that one rolls off the back of the other is unusual for Amaya, and it did not work out perfectly at the performance on 13 December simply because Amaya had not developed the level of trust needed for this to work out properly.

Insert Image 4 here

**Figure 4:** Jairo Amaya and Aurelia Baumgartner in *Wicked (Siguirija)* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

So this is work in progress: he tries to work with me in the more contemporary contact improvisation way while at the same time I pick up material from him which I then put into practice in my way that is not necessarily precisely as done in the Spanish tradition but amalgamated and fused with what I am able to perform. This way of collaboration gives rise to very interesting dimensions that are no longer purely one's own. (Baumgartner 2013)



In working with others, Baumgartner does not think that there is a hierarchy as such or at least it is not intended. What is true, however, is that she is the engine, the person who has the ideas and wants to put them into action. She then works with painters, module artists, filmmakers, photographers, actors and musicians. She works with dancers from different artistic backgrounds, such as classical ballet or, as in the production of *Nomad Rhythms*, *flamenco puro*. Baumgartner feels very honoured to be able to work with Jairo Amaya, because from experience not many *Gitanos* (Romani people in Spain, colloquially referred to as gypsies) are open to collaboration. They tend to be very reserved, and one of the reasons for this is that flamenco is considered almost like a fashion in some circles, as the ‘Spanish fire’ that becomes an industry for export of Spanish exotica. As such it is overly stylized and the essence of *flamenco puro* is almost ruined in the process. Some of this fashionable flamenco may still be virtuosic and extraordinary, but it loses its purity. Amaya comes from the School of *flamenco puro*/pure flamenco, untouched by those elements of export fashion.

In some of the pieces that form part of *Nomad Rhythms*, Amaya dances while Baumgartner stands at the back of the stage, level with the musicians, and accompanies his dance with clapping of her hands. She explains this aspect of live collaboration, as opposed to that in rehearsal, as follows:

It is one of the highest possible levels of concentration in working with him when he is performing with his rhythm, which is then expressed in my different ways of clapping. This is quite unlike following the rhythm provided by the metronome: instead it becomes faster, slower, louder, or softer. All this is improvised and requires an enormous level of concentration. A particular level of difficulty comes through the *contretemps*, the interim tempi that are created by interchange

and interplay between him clicking his fingers and the rhythm provided by his feet. In such situations it is essential to maintain the rhythm in such a way that it remains in between rather than fitting in and becoming one with either the rhythm of the feet or the rhythm of the hands. There are no time and space left for thought: it is a case of me living the rhythm in those situations. While it might appear that only my hands are doing something, it is in fact the whole body that is fully involved and I think that is also quite visible in the performance that I am sometimes almost tempted to run up and join him on the floor.

It is an exchange of question and answer almost between myself and the dancer and leads to a unity of some sort. However, this functions through some opposition between tiempo and contra-tiempo through syncopes about the basic rhythm in a sort of playing with the rhythm. This intricate exchange of rhythms then has to be balanced with the rhythms provided by the musicians. They are excellent musicians but it is a hard training and learning process for them as well because we don't live in the Spanish culture. When it comes to my clapping of my hands, it is important to know that there are differences in that as well: there are hollow and muffled sounds by having more of a hollow space between the hands while clapping, compared to different sounds when the palms of the hands come together straight. It is especially challenging after having danced for a while to engage in this clapping with sweaty palms because that influences the sound quality. The clapping of the hands thus becomes an instrument in its own right and has to sound like one. (2013)

Insert Image 5 here.

**Figure 5:** Aurelia Baumgartner and Jairo Amaya, with Franz Schledorn, trombone, in *Farucca* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

Baumgartner also explains why in the Spanish material in *Nomad Rhythms*, the live singing that is normally part of flamenco, was replaced by the trombone: many Spanish song lyrics are not comprehensible to a modern audience because they are written in *gitano* Spanish. Many of the song texts in this flamenco music are originally about the persecution that the *gitano*, the gypsies, had to suffer from Christian rulers. On the other hand, they are texts from folklore, usually singing of the admiration of female beauty or stories of the daily life and the joy and struggle between friendship or loves. If we have difficulties understanding the meaning of the lyrics then it becomes like fashionable folklore, which is fascinating and interesting in itself but lacks depth or the possibility to achieve depth.

As a result of these observations and thoughts, I tried to find a way for improved authenticity in putting this on stage myself. How can I find a way of being able to empathise, to feel what they might be feeling when they presented it in the way that is typical and characteristic for themselves. I get to this point of understanding by talking to Jairo by discussing things with him by asking him what is meant here, how this comes across and so on. It is a very strong and intensive learning process because he still teaches me repeatedly. (Baumgartner 2013)

In the daily rehearsal process, Baumgartner films the improvisation so that she can then look at the material later and edit critically. This allows her the highest level of flexibility and freedom in improvisation. She has come to dislike giving set steps to others, which they then

have to perform as instructed. Her work thus develops as a free interplay between imagination and reason, according to Immanuel Kant. Imagination does not run wild because structure is present. However, structure does not restrict: the imagination is given the amount of space it needs to make use of this structure.

To summarize: grounded in her own past and current experience, and always open to new experience regarding herself and others, Baumgartner is able to work with others in a genuinely collaborative manner, accepting what the other artists bring to the work, assimilating, adapting and responding to this intuitively, in the moment, in conjunction with ideas that may arise not out of the moment of rehearsal, but from intuitive and holistic reflection of it.

### **Femininity, beauty and non-linearity**

According to Saint Germain, one of the Ascended Masters in theosophy and other esoteric traditions, the purpose for souls to be incarnated as humans on the planet earth is for them to be able to develop the feminine side of their nature, irrespective of whether they are born as man or woman (2004). Against this background, femininity gains a very important role in the context of spirituality. According to Baumgartner, conceptual thinking is patriarchal – it allows us to classify or categorize the world. This forms the basis for ideologies, which in turn always form the basis for strife, struggle, estrangement, enemies and wars and ultimately exclusion. In one way she considers herself as a fairly masculine kind of person in so far as she takes initiative and seeks achievement. However, in her work she tries not to express this masculine side: ‘I find that this expresses itself in a desire to receive and to let go and allowing things to develop that I would consider predominately feminine in nature’ (2013). In practice, this combination of masculine impulse and drive, and the feminine ability of letting

go, may take the shape of Baumgartner being inspired by a concept, and then allowing the initial concept to encounter, and interact with, a different concept. The result is that her work is not linear and logical – it is not straightforward from A to B in a narrative way. ‘I have to qualify this: in some cases, in some areas I am narrative from A to B but at the same time by overlaying several layers of my work, networks come into existence’ (Baumgartner 2013). Thus the linear structure which seeks to understand and thus dominate the world is broken up through these additional layers; the result is ‘a more modest ego where humans no longer need to consider themselves as the crown of creation in order not to experience fear. This would then be a state of existence where one feels more integrated into and supported by the earth’ (Baumgartner 2013).

Integration is a feminine principle, and it is at the heart of Baumgartner’s art. The relationship of *yin* and *yang* is reflected in this approach: both need each other mutually, neither dominates the other, and both are allowed to exist in their own right and in relation to each other. Thus mind and body are not separated, one cannot exist without the other, and each needs the other. And this is also the area where concepts and experiences such as play, playfulness and vulnerability become relevant. Letting go of concepts on the stage is related to the fear of going out and just doing something without knowing precisely what is going to happen. In preparing for the performance on 13 December, she noticed that the floor of the venue was concrete, covered with the dance mat, and in the dress rehearsal she decided not to use her feet with full force because otherwise her joints would not be able to support her in the performance properly. In the performance itself, during the first half she noticed that she was not able to feel the earth through the concrete. Without that grounding, without that feeling of the earth it was not possible to get across to her audience what she would have wanted to get across, and what she would have been able to get across if that feeling of the

earth had been present. Grounding the body and feeling the earth are essential in spiritual development.

Insert Image 6 here.

**Figure 6:** Aurelia Baumgartner in *Wicked (Siguirija)* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

The experience reflected here is one of having to let go again and go out on the stage and performing under those difficult circumstances. In this way the space is integrated into the performance experience and this on a different level again becomes a form of play and becomes playful because Baumgartner has to improvise – she has to do things differently:

I have to do certain steps in a different way because I just can't do them in the way I intended to on this particular ground. So much happens spontaneously and that is again something that musicians have to respond to and react to in the moment. (2013)

As key attitudes and experiences in the context of spirituality, femininity and related concepts and experiences of play, playfulness, vulnerability and letting go, are central to Baumgartner's life and art. She is aware of the apparent opposition of this to masculinity, but seeks to integrate both, arguing, specifically in view of the concept of the male gaze that it would of course be possible to neutralize one's appearance as a woman, to come in training gear and to cut one's hair short. However, such an attitude in turn would also be a response and the question then arises why women are expected only to react:

why shouldn't it be possible and allowed for female performers to relish the feminine form and to be able to express one's femininity in and through the body

without at the same time seeking to conform with some outwardly superimposed ideal of beauty by cosmetic surgery and all other kinds of rather artificial approaches which again would only be a way of responding. (Baumgartner 2013)

Response is not independent; response is either in the negative (making yourself ugly), or a positive (making yourself beautiful). ‘What I am aiming at is a lived femininity which allows you to enjoy the way we really are rather than any kind of response or ideal’ (Baumgartner 2013).

These views, arguments and experiences find their way into her work, for example in the use of the pointe shoes in *Human without Cerebrum*. She used them as a sign for the romantic concept of dance because the female dancer with these pointe shoes has been performing the roles of nymphs, of princesses and other creatures beyond the human who are by their very nature unobtainable, and who cannot be reached by conventional humans. This kind of supernatural female creature is a very strongly male idea, just as today’s supermodels are male ideas – they are unreachable because of the extremely slim nature of that ideal, ‘almost starved, almost dead’ (Baumgartner 2013). The pointe shoe in ballet lifts the body off the ground into a romantic state of obedience or suspense, leaving the image of a woman that does not really exist. In a similar way *High Gloss Magazines* show images that are airbrushed to the extreme even in the cases of the women who are already the most beautiful around. Thus an extreme form of femininity is created artificially. Bordo analysed this phenomenon in her groundbreaking 1993 study *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, and in the new preface for the tenth anniversary edition in 2003, she considers the digital modification of images of celebrity women as ‘perceptual pedagogy, How to Interpret

Your Body 101 [...] Digital creations, visual cyborgs, teaching us what to expect from flesh and blood' (2003: xviii). Baumgartner is aware of this dimension, and argues:

[...] if we only react to it by saying we present women in a different way, then that is only a position of opposition – not one where women actually know who and where they are. What I am trying to do is to find out and experience and sense in myself what femininity is in the first place. I would then be interested in the response this kind of approach has among my audience. (2013)

Baumgartner argues that this approach is reflected in the costumes she wears in her performances – not only dresses but sometimes also trousers. In her last piece in the *Nomad Rhythms* production she wore stylized trousers based on the trousers worn by the gypsy smiths. On other occasions she does not have specialist costumes like that, and on those occasions she performs in what looks more like training gear. In the context of the Spanish gypsies she tried to create her costumes in such a way that they reflected some of the cultural context without being tacky or cheesy but still related to the context that she wanted to demonstrate.

Eclectic background video, lighting in soft pastel colours and imaginative soundscapes are characteristic of Baumgartner's productions. Although on their own many such components may not be beautiful as such, they combine to an impression of beauty for the spectator. This in turn is related to femininity, because it is the aspects of femininity permeating her work that make the work as a whole, in a holistic sense, beautiful. Baumgartner is ambiguous about that impression her work creates on the spectator, given that the concept of beauty, or beauty as an ideal of art, have been abolished, almost.



Just like love, beauty is part of a growing marketing dimension, it has become an industry and so in some cases not jumping that bandwagon might actually be an indication of people trying to avoid being accused of jumping the bandwagon. The accusation here would be that one is not critical enough, just swimming with the flow. (2013)

On the other hand, eminent German actor and director Gustaf Gründgens (1899–1963) argued that it is incredibly easy to direct a scandal but to create real beauty onstage is so much more difficult (1963). There is a striking difference between any airbrushed ideal of beauty and the one that we encounter in Baumgartner's work. The individual artists contributing to those images and the background, and the music and the dance develop, and bring in their own understanding and experience of beauty. Overall, Baumgartner's work expands the concept, the idea and the experience of beauty. It allows it to transcend those material values of the airbrush and is more than that because it comes from deeply within. This is what is fascinating about performance in theatre and dance: objects and contents of everyday life gain a different, larger dimension when they are presented on the stage. The challenge then is to say, with some precision at least, what causes this additional dimension, this larger dimension to grow, to develop, to come into existence in the first place. The performance leads to a holistic experience and this holistic experience is not limited to understanding, which is a faculty of the intellect. The holistic experience is beautiful because of the joy of being holistic.

To summarize: femininity is a major aspect of spirituality; Baumgartner has developed a clear position in relation to this concept and experience, and related issues of vulnerability

and fear, letting go, non-linearity and beauty. In performance, what comes across to the spectator as the performer's vulnerability is in fact the performer revealing their innermost essence onstage; however, that essence is in fact not vulnerable at all because it emerges from the invincible level of the platonic form of beauty.

Insert Image 7 here

**Figure 7:** Aurelia Baumgartner, with Franz Schledorn, trombone, in *Human without Cerebrum: Attempts* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

## Aspects of biography

### *Training and Crossroads*

Baumgartner trained in classical ballet from an early age, as well as in ice skating, which became her passion. According to a number of different spiritual traditions, all humans are in the process of spiritual development, at different stages according to the Divine Plan (Saint Germain 2004). For all humans, their individual paths include the necessity to make decisions, major or minor, at many junctions and crossroads. For Baumgartner, the most influential crossroads came when at the age of 14 she injured her knee and was declared an invalid by the specialist who saw her in hospital. After a year of treatment, without any success, she made her first decision at those crossroads by asking her parents to arrange for her to attend a boarding school in France, thus giving her the opportunity of leaving Germany altogether. In the meantime, the condition of her knee deteriorated because in the course of her growth the cartilage in the knee did not grow with the bones, a condition exacerbated through having always jumped on to the hard ice during her years of ice skating. She

developed a condition called *osteochondrosis dissecans*. Later, she had to have the piece of cartilage that was stuck in the knee joint operated out, which left her with an almost stiff leg. This was the trigger for the second major decision in relation to the injury crossroads:

If the doctor told me not to do any exercise any more and still the cartilage ended up in the knee joint where it had to be operated on, then I might as well do everything again because there the doctor might get it wrong as well. I lost trust in conventional medicine at that point. (Baumgartner 2013)

She was 17 year old at that time and started with yoga. This proved an essential decision on her path. At that time yoga was not as popular and available everywhere as it is today, but she came across a self-help book by Kareen Zebroff and started exercising on the basis of that book ‘and suddenly I was able to move my knee joint’ (2013). Yoga, together with breathing exercises and an enhanced awareness of her nutrition opened up a completely new path that brought her back to dance. She shifted from working with dance on ice to working with dance on snow, from ice skating to ski ballet – since her accident in ice skating she has never been on the ice again, never put on skates again because the size of the shock at the time: ‘It had been such an enormous dream of mine, which had been erased from moment to the next when this diagnosis was given to me’ (2013). Baumgartner’s involvement with ski ballet was very successful: she became part of the German national team for ski ballet. It is in this context that she also met the partner of leading German dance teacher Jessica Iwanson and through this connection she learnt Iwanson’s approach to dance. At the same time she studied philosophy at the University of Munich, emphasizing that she needed the balance of thinking and physical engagement ‘I always had to move. Having to think only felt like having myself cut off from the head down’ (2013). Baumgartner also trained in other approaches to dance

apart from Iwanson, such as Graham and Cunningham, which were to become influential in her own practice.

### *Heritage*

Baumgartner presents herself as a dancing philosopher, and her work as dance philosophy. She wants to convey ideas of philosophy through her work, and understands it as embodied philosophy. Baumgartner's interest in philosophy, and the interweaving of philosophy and dance characteristic of her life, may well have been inherited: her father, Hans Michael Baumgartner (1933–1999) was a disciple of eminent philosopher Hermann Krings (1913–2004) and became Professor of Philosophy in Giessen and Bonn. In addition to inheritance, which one can assume but not empirically prove, there were life influences (nurture versus nature). Baumgartner developed an interest in her father's world. She had many questions about, or even of life, and asked questions beginning with 'why', also triggered by insecurities that arose in the wake of the injury and the diagnosis 'I left the hospital on that day totally destroyed' (2013). Insecurity as the basis for asking questions may have been caused as well by the absence of her father for much of her childhood: 'I didn't see my father much as a child' (2013). Her father had to be away from home a lot due to his profession, with his home in Starnberg near Munich and his work in Giessen and Bonn, respectively. Because her mother was highly respectful of her father's work, she arranged the home in such a way that she did not involve him in any activity she could take care of herself. As a result both Baumgartner and her sister did not spend much time with their father.

In those days, so many years ago, it was different anyway, the father was a bit more distant. My mother is quite an emancipated woman. Over a lot of the time of my childhood and that of my sister, she was almost a single parent as far as parenting was concerned because in addition to taking care of us she was the

carer for her mother so she could not accompany her husband when he went away. (2013)

To summarize: the crossroads of the injury led to major decisions in the path of Baumgartner's spiritual development, first that of seeking a major change in her life by going to France, and second that of seeking out yoga to heal herself. The depth of her relation to philosophy can be understood through her heritage: she is likely to have inherited a tendency to ask questions of life from her philosopher father, while the tendency was enhanced by life experiences: the crisis of the injury and the perceived injustice of it, and the discrepancy of a growing interest in her father's world and work, and the fact that her father was often away and she rarely spent time with him. These are the innermost contexts, implicit and tacit rather than explicit, but informing the contents of all the other circles.

Insert Image 8 here

**Figure 8:** Aurelia Baumgartner in *Human without Cerebrum: Attempts* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

### **Cultural and philosophical contextualization**

Baumgartner's work has been influenced by a wide range of material from across different cultures. Her work with Jairo Amaya reflects a major interest in Spanish dance traditions, and her training encompasses pakua and taiji. An overarching aim of Baumgartner's performance work has become to express philosophical ideas, to embody them in her dance, and thus to develop a mode of thinking through the body rather than merely in the rational mind. A philosopher will see something different in the performances than a non-philosopher. It is very important to undertake every possible attempt to get away from pure intellectual

thinking – to allow a holistic approach and perspective and experience in which the intellectual, the judgemental is one but not the exclusive component. This tendency is evident in her emphasis on inspiration, from her ways of intuitive collaboration, and her emphasis on femininity. It is also an important development in the overall trend towards considering the world in terms of embodiment. Then it becomes interesting how to understand this kind of embodiment in practical terms, what it means precisely.

Insert Image 9 here

**Figure 9:** Aurelia Baumgartner with Franz Schledorn (trombone) in *Human without Cerebrum: Attempts* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

The case study to exemplify thinking through the body is provided by the performance of *Nomad Rhythms* on 13 December 2013. Baumgartner's own contextualization of this production reveals those overarching aspects very clearly. First of all, she comments on the influence from Spanish *flamenco*, and how this interweaves with philosophy, in this case Nietzsche, and aspects of femininity in the first section of the production, *Cartucha*:

In the first part I tried to recreate the path of the Spanish gypsies, *gitanos* in the various different dance forms that are represented in that part, *rumba*, *fandango*, *tango*, *farucca* and *siguirija*. I tried to do this both on a more traditional level but then also to break up this tradition by use for example of an excerpt by Nietzsche which I spoke into the microphone at some point in this first part. It is interesting to note that in the first piece, *Cartucha*, in the dance form of *rumba*, I had on the video female faces behind bars to show the restriction of femininity. (2013)

Her comments on the second piece, *Asturias*, the *flamenco* dimension combines with material on her inspiration and her way of collaborating with Amaya.

With regard to the second piece, *Asturias*, this was a choreography that I had done in the past and which I had revived for this production. I re-choreographed it as a *pas de deux* with Jairo Amaya and it took a long time for him to be open to my approach, coming from his own very specialist one. At first initially he told me that this *Asturias* was not actually a proper flamenco piece. Later, however, he observed me in the pieces where this was a component part and in the end he said: ‘what you are doing here is actually flamenco after all because what you are doing is pure. You are expressing the rhythm in a pure way as you experience it in your body. Your body language is different from the Spanish one but it is not superimposed’, and this is something that he would like to learn from me, to become more familiar with my body language, to understand my body language just as I tried to understand his body language, where understanding is again not merely an intellectual process but is embodied itself. It was after about four years of working with him that he said: ‘let’s do this together’, so that is why I reintegrated this *Asturias* into the piece. This whole episode was a very interesting one in my own development as an artist because at first this *gitano* says what I am doing is not proper flamenco so I was left with the impression that he doesn’t understand me in this respect. Then he came and said ‘I now understand what you are doing’, so it is a mutual process of understanding over the years. What I have put on stage in this first part of this programme is the path of the *gitanos* encountering different things again and again and pick them up and integrate them into their own form. (Baumgartner 2013)

Central to her philosophy of the thinking body was the piece *Human without Cerebrum*, and two related questions: (1) to what extent is rationality the only form of perceiving and grasping the world and (2) is this way of perceiving and grasping the world rated too highly? In response to those questions, Baumgartner started developing both the concept and the related practice of body thinking – to grasp it theoretically, to put it into practice in her pedagogical work, in her teaching, and to make it visible practically in her performances without becoming illustrative.

My performances are structured as body-thinking, the impulse to thematise the body as a comprehensive form of thinking – with reference to Immanuel Kant as a thinking-in-motion with enhanced perception. This approach was inspired by my choreographic and pedagogical work with bodies in dance, as well as my encounter of Asian body and consciousness techniques (pakua, taiji, martial arts, yoga, cien chiqua and others) and it has been influenced further by the study of oriental and occidental philosophies.

I thus try to conventionalise body thinking as a process of forming structures caused by impulses and resistance as opposites of the other. The process I am talking about here is one of creating structure that deconstructs and reconstructs precoded structures in this interaction with the ‘other’, and does so without demand of a final interpretant. This process thus remains open in the sense of Eco’s ‘open work of art’. (Baumgartner 2013)



To summarize: Baumgartner's work has been influenced by many approaches to dance and dance forms, as well as many ideas from western and eastern philosophy. She considers her productions as stages in an attempt to develop ways of expressing thinking and philosophy through the body, as a form of embodied thinking. She exposes herself on a daily basis to a wide range of potential influences, but does not get lost in that whirlpool, but forges her own distinctive pathway. This expression of strength suggests that she is firmly rooted and grounded (hence her ability to notice when she is unable to feel the earth on occasions when she performs on concrete). The experience of being grounded, and the mode of life resulting from it are further indications of true spirituality, which is not lifted off the ground of reality as the characters portrayed by female dancers in classical ballet, represented by the pointe shoes (see above). Spirituality is not mood-making, but a very real characteristic of life.

Insert Image 10 here

**Figure 10:** Aurelia Baumgartner, Raphaela Baumgartner and Arab Grey Pegasus in *Tanzende Pferde: Spiegelungen in Raum/Dancing Horses: Reflections in Space* (photographer: Herbert Hoffmann). Image edited by Roman Luyken (see Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2014).

## Outlook

The concentric circles of Baumgartner's art that I have discussed in this article allow an insight into individual layers of spirituality of the holistic nature of this artist's exciting work. The crossroads of injury led to major decisions in the path of Baumgartner's spiritual development. The depth of her relation to philosophy can be understood through her heritage. Baumgartner's inspiration and her resulting way of working are predominantly intuitive and thus spiritual. She has realized this and implications for her life and her work, and trusts it. Femininity is a major aspect of spirituality; Baumgartner has developed a clear position in

relation to this concept and experience, and related issues of vulnerability and fear, letting go, non-linearity and beauty. Baumgartner's work is influenced by many approaches to dance and dance forms, as well as many ideas from western and eastern philosophy. She considers her productions as stages in an attempt to develop ways of expressing thinking and philosophy through the body, as a form of embodied thinking. Grounded in her own existing experience, and always open to new experience regarding herself and others, Baumgartner is able to work with others in a genuinely collaborative manner, accepting what the other artists bring to the work, assimilating, adapting and responding to this intuitively, in the moment, in conjunction with ideas that may arise not out of the moment of rehearsal, but from intuitive and holistic reflection of it. Not only Baumgartner and her collaborators are thus able to relish and enjoy their creative work, but all those aspects of their work will have their conscious or unconscious impact on each spectator.

All these aspects come together in Baumgartner's work in a holistic manner, such that no one single aspect can be considered to be dominating the other. In performance, these aspects become engaging and demanding for spectators, who are invited to partake in the holistic nature of the performance. What happens between performer and spectators in Baumgartner's performances is comparable to Indian performance aesthetics, where performers and spectators together create, in performance, the aesthetic experience of *rasa*. 'Many things in my performances are such that people will not understand them in a narrative way. If you want a story and if you wanted to hear and see a story being told then this is not what you get in my performances' (Baumgartner 2013). The multidimensional nature of her performances, productions and choreographies develop and require different or new modes of reception on the part of the audience, in so far as the impressions might break up predetermined ideas. Not being able to fit what one perceives onstage with an appreciated and predeveloped,

predetermined pattern of reception means that new patterns of reception need to be developed to be able to make sense of what is happening onstage.

You will find narrative in the case of classical ballet: a story is being told, people go home satisfied and contented because they have seen something, they know what they have seen. That is less demanding than an encounter with my performances, where spectators will be thinking, ‘what was this about, what happened here?’ so that they ask questions. (Baumgartner 2013)

Spirituality thus travels and multiplies.

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